



Intra-group interactions and inter-group violence: Sikh mobilization during the partition of India in a comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT

Theories of ethnic conflict posit ethnic mobilization by elites as a necessary condition for ethnic war. What is less well understood is why ethnic mobilization succeeds in some instances, but not in others. This article examines this question using a case that is yet to be systematically explored from this perspective: Sikh mobilization during the partition of British India in 1947. During the period February–July 1947, there were two clear instances in which a section of Sikh elites tried to mobilize group members. While the first attempt at mobilization in March failed to elicit sufficient mass participation, the second attempt, in July, was more effective and created the preconditions for the violence that ensued in August. What explains this variation in mobilization outcomes? We contend that this difference can be traced back to key changes in elite strategy from March to July. In March, mobilization failed because the Sikh elites who were committed to the path of violence left the onus of the mobilization on a small group of extremists and mass sentiments, ignoring serious intra-community differences based on class and caste inequalities. By contrast, in July, they emphasized the issue of land dispossession and gave credible indications of their resolve to use violence to defend individual rights to land. These actions produced greater compliance because of the specific capacity of anti-land dispossession politics to blur intra-group social inequalities and heighten inter-group tensions based on land dispossession.

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Introduction

In August 1947, two new states, India and Pakistan, were created from undivided British India. The creation of these states was marked by extreme inter-group violence. In particular, the province of Punjab, which, along with Bengal, was partitioned into Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority areas, became the site of one of the most devastating incidents of ethnic violence in the twentieth century.¹

Although culpability in the partition violence in Punjab was universal—Paul Brass has aptly described it as ‘retributive genocide’²—it is also now well documented that the peak phase of the violence coincided with the militarization of a significant section of

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the Sikhs, the smaller of the three major ethnic groups of Punjab, whose members lived interspersed among the more numerically preponderant Hindu and Muslim communities of the province. Prior to the period leading up to the partition, the Sikhs had patiently followed the tense negotiations between Hindu and Muslim leaders about the future shape of India and Pakistan. From February 1947 onwards, however, the community 'jumped from the sidelines onto the centre stage', seeming 'more theatrical than real' and 'added to social tensions in the localities a degree of violence that was beyond anything the actors at the all-India level or the region had imagined'.³ In particular, in the month of August, *jathas* (war bands) associated with the community had become the primary aggressors, and the targets of their attacks were the Muslims of East Punjab.⁴ While the Sikh *jathas* ran amok in the East Punjab districts, pillaging and plundering Muslim villages, group members from West Punjab, fleeing from or in anticipation of retaliation by Muslim gangs, poured into the districts where Muslim populations had either been decimated or forcibly evacuated. The ethnic cleansing of Muslims and the in-migration of Sikhs was most dense in the districts under Sikh princely rule, which had the largest concentration of Sikhs in the pre-partition period.⁵ The net result of these manoeuvres was that almost the entire Sikh population of Punjab had been relocated on the Indian side of the partition line.

In a recent review of the vast historiography on the partition of India, Gilmartin makes the important point that this historiography now provides incredible narrative detail about what happened during the partition, but the movement towards unearthing richer micro-dynamics has become increasingly disassociated from analyses of theoretical implications of the event for other cases of large-scale inter-group violence.⁶ This article joins an emerging body of research that has sought to fill this gap.⁷ This research has demonstrated that the partition violence in Punjab can be viewed through the prism of competing sovereignties,⁸ the legacy of Punjabis being heavily involved in combat operations during World War II,⁹ and the security dilemma.¹⁰ We note that the focus of this work has been on certain structural aspects of the Punjab case that made ethnic war between its communities very likely during the transfer of power. What has been less well explored are the intra-group dynamics that translated these structural opportunities into violent outcomes. Our analysis seeks to fill this gap.

A well-known proposition in the literature on ethnic conflict is that ethnic mobilization by elites is a necessary condition for ethnic war. What is less well understood is why elite attempts at provoking ethnic mobilization succeed in some instances, but not in others. The Sikh case is particularly instructive for answering this question since, as we note below, between February and July 1947, there were two clear instances in which a section of Sikh elites tried to mobilize group members. The first instance was in March after the announcement of 20 February that all British security forces in India would be evacuated by no later than June 1948. The second instance was in July after the announcement of the partition plan on 3 June. While the first attempt at mobilization failed to elicit sufficient mass participation, the second attempt was more effective and created the preconditions for the violence that ensued in August.

What explains this variation in mobilization outcomes? We contend that this difference can be traced back to key changes in elite strategy from March to July. In March, mobilization failed because the Sikh elites who were committed to the path of violence left the

onus of the mobilization on a small group of extremists and mass sentiments, ignoring serious intra-community differences based on caste and class inequalities. By contrast, in July, they emphasized the issue of land dispossession and gave credible indications of their resolve to use violence to defend individual rights to land. These actions produced greater compliance because of the specific capacity of anti-land dispossession politics to blur intra-group social inequalities and heighten inter-group tensions based on land dispossession.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on intra-group mobilization during large-scale inter-group violence and present our theory of effective ethnic mobilization. In the third section, we analyse the Sikh case in detail. The fourth section distils the implications of the Sikh case for our understanding of ethnic mobilization more generally. The fifth section concludes.

Theory of intra-group interactions and large-scale inter-group violence

The literature on large-scale inter-group violence is among the most voluminous in the social sciences. In a recent study, Tang has proposed a general theory that synthesizes the various strands of this literature into a simple conceptual scheme.¹¹ According to Tang, there are two meta-mechanisms that are necessary for large-scale inter-group violence to break out: the security dilemma/spiral model and inter-group/intra-group interactions.¹² While the security dilemma/spiral model refers to the spiral pattern in which insecurity spreads among group members on all sides in a setting where central authority has collapsed or is biased towards one or the other group, inter-group/intra-group interactions refer to the process through which belligerent elites emerge within contending groups in response to mass insecurity and instigate violence. Taking Tang's broad rubric as our starting point, we focus in the rest of this section on the literature that speaks specifically to within-group elite–mass interactions in the production of large-scale inter-group violence.

Before proceeding further, we discuss two concepts that are central to Tang's conceptualization of inter-group/intra-group interactions, and also inform our subsequent analysis, i.e. 'ethnic mobilization' and 'ethnic outbidding'. Tang defines ethnic mobilization as the process that makes 'group members willing to both sacrifice for the group and inflict violence and atrocities upon the other group'.¹³ Since it is reasonable to assume that the masses of any given group, by and large, have benign perceptions of the masses of other groups to begin with, the key question becomes how mobilization, i.e. the state of willingness to sacrifice or kill on behalf of the group, becomes possible. The key tactic in intra-group mobilization, Tang argues, is 'ethnic outbidding by elites'.¹⁴ This is the process through which belligerent elites within the group try to wean away mass support from moderate elites by using the mass media to project the latter as traitorous.¹⁵ However, ethnic outbidding per se is unlikely to cause inter-group violence. A key intervening variable is the response of moderate elites within the group. If these elites can firmly counter the hawkish elites' actions, then moderate elites from both groups can work together and forge the foundations for mass peace.¹⁶ If, on the other hand, they are unable or unwilling to counter the hawkish elites, then they themselves become belligerent, which in turn activates belligerence among elites of the opposing group, eventually leading to inter-group violence.¹⁷

Notice that the crux of the preceding discussion is not to suggest that group masses are incapable of autonomous action. Indeed, as noted by Copland in the context of ethnic cleansing in the Sikh princely states of Punjab,¹⁸ there was no doubt that a spirit of retaliation had diffused through the Sikh communities of the states as they heard tales of suffering from refugees pouring in from Western Punjab. Rumours about suspicious congregations of Muslims also kindled a desire to kill. Yet the translation of these unconscious motivations into the actual act of killing, Copland argues, could not have happened without the tacit connivance of the governments of the princely states. A similar point is made by Brass in the context of the ethnic killings in British Punjab. While there was no clear chain of command between Sikh leaders and the gangs that wreaked havoc on the ground, 'speeches and statements were made and signals were given by known political leaders that deliberately encouraged and sanctioned violence'.¹⁹ These observations underscore Tang's contention that 'mass-led violence cannot become a full-scale ethnic war without elite manipulation and mobilization of mass media'.²⁰

We are now in a position to state the core theoretical question of interest in this article. Under what conditions can belligerent elites make a successful claim to mass allegiance? A review of the existing literature on intra-group mass–elite interactions suggests two main theoretical considerations for separating successful cases of mobilization from failed cases. The first of these theoretical arguments is suggested by the work of Kaufman, who observes that malignant elites can successfully outflank moderate elites through the skilful use of ethnic symbols that play up the historic threat posed by the out-group to in-group members.²¹ Once these symbols are unleashed in the political arena, mass participation will follow because of the emotional charge associated with them. Notice, the key assumption here is that certain ethnic symbols have the capacity to provoke ethnic mobilization, but not others. Consequently, mobilization will fail when belligerent elites fail to 'get the symbols right', or succeed when they do.

A second line of argument follows from Fearon and Laitin's seminal analysis of the role of discourses in violent inter-group conflict.²² Noting that ethnic myths and symbols are multi-faceted objects that can be mined to promote ethnic harmony as well as ethnic dis-harmony, the study advances the hypothesis that in addition to the discursive aspect, successful cases of mobilization almost always feature a small group of specialists in violence associated with belligerent elites, who instigate violence at the latter's behest. For example, upon a cue from their patrons, these violent actors may clandestinely attack moderate elites within the group, but attribute the attack to the out-group, which in turn triggers retaliation by the ordinary members of the in-group against ordinary members of the out-group, setting the stage for ethnic war. In other words, this account injects a limited form of instrumental rationality into mass nationalist violence via the intermediation of conspiratorial elite–warrior linkages. Conversely, it suggests that nationalist mobilization is likely to fail in the absence of these linkages.²³

Notice, despite the obvious differences between the symbolic politics approach and the elite–warrior linkage approach, a common assumption underlies both, namely, in either case, mobilization is achieved 'cheaply', without the elites having to engage the masses in a comprehensive dialogue about the costs and benefits of the mobilization. We now develop a third line of argument, which gives full play to mass instrumental rationality on par with elite instrumental rationality. We denote this argument as the 'land politics' approach to mass nationalist violence.

The starting point of our theory of mass nationalist violence is a core observation made by Popkin in his seminal study of peasant behaviour during the Vietnamese revolution.²⁴ Articulating a theory of the rational peasant, Popkin observed how the Vietnamese peasantry initially perceived the revolution as a matter of the distant high culture of the state and the army, with little bearing on their material conditions of existence. Enlistment numbers, however, increased dramatically when they were offered side-payments by the revolutionary elites as compensation for the sacrifices they were being asked to make. The upshot, therefore, is that revolutionary mobilization was successful only when the perceived benefit to the individual peasant from participation was greater than the perceived cost.

Adapting Popkin's economicistic account of revolutionary mobilization to the context of nationalist mobilization, we note that belligerent nationalist elites face a similar problem. Their goal is to mobilize the mass members of an ethnic group in a setting in which the latter are not going to be swayed by abstract calls to sacrifice for the group alone. However, at another level, the nationalist mobilizer faces a more complicated task than the revolutionary mobilizer since a group may be riven by multiple social inequalities. For example, the members of one sub-group within the group may be linked to members of another sub-group by capitalist–employee relations or by landowner–tenant relations or by a race-based hierarchy. Moreover, these social inequalities may overlap with each other, i.e. the same sub-group may find itself at the bottom of all of these hierarchies. What are the conditions for effective mobilization in such a setting?

To answer this question, we turn to a rich literature on contemporary anti-land dispossession movements in the developing world.²⁵ In an important study of anti-dispossession movements in India, Levien argues that these movements have the unique capacity to forge solidarities between individuals from diverse locations within the social hierarchy of land relations—the landowner, the tenant and the landless labourer (provided land is a stable source of work)—and can be harnessed to various political ideologies. This is because, contrary to other forms of expropriation, the loss of land ‘poses a sudden exogenous and irreversible threat’ to those whose livelihoods depend on it.²⁶ Hence, in the face of such expropriation, individuals have no choice but to ‘prioritize immediately threatening class antagonisms based on the dispossession of land’ and ‘de-emphasize ongoing class antagonisms based on exploitation’.²⁷

Going back to the context of nationalist mobilization, we note that the anti-dispossession frame can also be a potent tool for belligerent elites who seek to motivate the mass members of an ethnic group to make sacrifices on behalf of the group. Assuming that all members of the group have land-based livelihoods—they may be involved in multiple occupations, but association with land is a significant source of income—we hypothesize that ethnic mobilization is more likely to be effective if belligerent elites are able to establish a credible link between group violence and the defence of individual rights to land. More specifically, if the call to arms is made on the grounds that violence against the antagonist ethnic group is necessary to prevent dispossession of land and the belligerents are able to give a credible signal of their ability to direct the use of violence in a disciplined and systematic manner, the chances of mass support will increase. Given the immediate and clear threat posed by land dispossession, the very spectre of it will induce group members to sublimate their internal differences—which may be equally pressing on

them, but not with such clarity—and externalize these onto the source of dispossession, i.e. members of the antagonist ethnic group.

Critical conjunctures in Sikh mobilization during the partition of India

This article uses the within-case analysis method to test the theory of ethnic mobilization outlined above. The standard usage of the case study method in comparative politics has been as a means of building theoretical arguments as opposed to testing them.²⁸ This has been attributed to the so-called ‘many variables, small N’ problem, i.e. the larger the number of rival explanations and the smaller the number of cases, the fewer the degrees of freedom available to the researcher to discriminate between those explanations.²⁹ Our usage of the method as a means of theory-testing follows George and McKeown, who recommend using within-case over-time variation to circumvent the problem of ‘many variables, small N’, and then using ‘process tracing’, through which the researcher identifies the pathway through which change comes about.³⁰ Notice, once employed in this way, the case study method is an even more powerful tool for testing theories than the comparative method because it allows the researcher to control for *all* omitted variables that vary between cases, but are constant over time.

Although process tracing involves studying change, its core building block is careful description of each step in the process.³¹ Accordingly, in what follows, we begin by establishing that there were two instances between February and August 1947 when a section of Sikh elites, who were committed to a violent ethno-nationalist project, tried to mobilize the masses, but with varying success. Subsequently, we show that this variation closely tracked key differences in the manner in which these elites related to the masses during each instance of mobilization.

Our analysis here draws on a rich historiography on the politics of Punjab during the last stages of colonial rule in India.³² Where relevant, this has been supplemented by primary evidence surveyed by the author during field research in India.³³ Among the secondary sources, Raghuvendra Tanwar’s *Reporting the partition of Punjab 1947: press, public and other opinions* is particularly noteworthy. The book is a collation of reports, letters, opinions, columns, editorials, classifieds and photographs drawn from fifteen major Punjab-based and national newspapers published from February 1947 onwards. Since newspapers serve as important conduits for elite–mass communication, especially during times of crisis, this source provides a very useful vantage point for reconstructing the conversations that took place within the Sikh community during this period.

Before discussing the two critical conjunctures in Sikh mobilization in 1947, it is worth noting that a low level of political violence had been a routine aspect of Punjabi politics since the Provincial Assembly elections of January 1946. The elections saw a cross-communal coalition—comprised of the Unionist Party, which represented rural landed interests from each of the three major communities of the province, the Punjab Congress, which too claimed to speak on behalf of all three communities, but was more urban-based, and the Akali Dal, which exclusively spoke on behalf of the Sikhs—come to power. The problem was that this coalition had been formed to keep the Punjab Muslim League, which had emerged as the single largest party in the elections, out of power. The Punjab League had fought the elections almost as a referendum on ‘Pakistan’, but having fallen short of a majority, it was unable to muster a coalition of its own.³⁴

Nevertheless, despite failing to form the government, the Leaguers, emboldened by their electoral success, proved to be a formidable, and often very vocal, opposition.³⁵ Fiery public demonstrations demanding that the League be allowed to form the government became an everyday occurrence. These were, in turn, countered by equally emotional demonstrations by supporters of the government, raising the pitch even further.

The nature of political conflict, however, changed dramatically with Clement Attlee's momentous declaration of 20 February 1947. The declaration stated that (i) all British troops posted in India would be evacuated by no later than June 1948 and (ii) the colonial government would not hesitate to transfer power to legitimate provincial governments if the three main parties at the all-India negotiating table—the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the Akali Dal—were unable to come to an agreement on the future shape of India by that period. While the intention behind the declaration was to shock the negotiators into an all-India agreement, its net effect was to unleash a provincial power grab.

On 2 March, Khizar Hayat Khan, the leader of the Unionists and the premier of Punjab, resigned from his post. As Pardesi and Ganguly correctly observe, Khizar's resignation marked the onset of the security dilemma in Punjab.³⁶ This point was driven home by a massive rally organized by Muslim women in Lahore on 3 March to celebrate the League's 'victory' in forcing Khizar's resignation. That a police force, comprised overwhelmingly of Muslims, simply stood aside to allow the recklessly provocative rally to proceed was a clear indication that law and order had broken down. Nonetheless, as a last-ditch effort to uphold constitutional procedures, Evan Jenkins, the governor of Punjab, invited the Punjab League to form the new government. The move was bitterly contested by the Akali party and the Punjab Congress, leading to an impasse.

It was this impasse that provided the pretext for the first attempt by a belligerent section of the Sikh elite to mobilize the community. On 4 March, a large public meeting of Sikhs and Hindus was convened in front of the Lahore Assembly, where Sikh leaders announced that they were going to oppose the formation of a League government at all costs. The actions of two Sikh leaders during this meeting are particularly noteworthy. Master Tara Singh, president of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (hereafter SGPC), told the rapt audience: 'Our motherland is calling for blood ... we crushed Mughalism and we shall trample Pakistan. The Sikhs ruled the Muslims with their might and even now shall rule'.³⁷ Giani Kartar Singh, president of the Akali Dal, intonated: 'This day the crusade starts'.³⁸ The provocations took a more ominous turn when a Muslim procession also assembled at the same site. At this juncture, the Master famously waved his *kirpan* (sword) before the Muslim crowd, shouting 'Kat ke denge apni jan magar na denge Pakistan' (literally, 'We would get cut into pieces, but will not concede Pakistan').³⁹

These incendiary words and gestures emanating from the two Sikh leaders had tremendous significance. As the Punjab governor had noted at the time, the Master was 'probably the Sikh leader with the greatest personal following', whereas Giani Kartar Singh was 'a typical party boss', and together they formed a very formidable duo at the apex of the community.⁴⁰

In the immediate aftermath of the 4 March meeting, a group of Sikh and Hindu students clashed with the Muslim-dominated Punjab police in Lahore. As word of this event spread, violence erupted in Western Punjab. The initial aggressors in this violence were organized

Muslim gangs, who, 'with weapons in their hands and, in some places, steel helmets on their heads, indulged in murder, loot and arson on a scale never witnessed before in the Punjab during hundred years of British rule'.⁴¹ Their victims were helpless Sikhs and Hindus. The Sikhs, in particular, bore the brunt of the attacks. They were 'especial [sic] targets of attack, their houses and their beards alike being set on fire'.⁴²

The attacks sent a wave of Sikh and Hindu refugees scurrying to the towns of Central and Eastern Punjab, where non-Muslims were preponderant. As these refugees poured in, carrying with them tales of the horrific violence they had endured in their home towns, a wave of spontaneous reprisals and counter-reprisals ensued, until all of Punjab was touched by the conflict.

It is instructive to note that despite having strong informal linkages—Akali Dal members were allowed joint membership in the Punjab Congress—the two organizations had, thus far, refrained from building formal alliances. The events surrounding 4 March, however, completely transformed the relationship, as the Dal, at the behest of Tara Singh, joined hands with the Congress on 8 March to adopt a joint resolution demanding the immediate partition of Punjab. Incidentally, the resolution was clear that the partition line was to be drawn on a purely notational basis separating the Muslim majority areas of the province from the non-Muslim majority areas, effectively splitting Central Punjab into two halves. Interestingly, however, each side had a very different rationale for making such a demand. For the Congress, the partition line would prevent further migration of the type that had occurred recently from Western Punjab since the presence of a significant number of minorities on one side of the line would be a guarantee for the security of the significant number of minorities who would remain on the other side of the line. For Tara Singh and his supporters, on the other hand, the line would create the basis for a peaceful exchange of population between both sides such that the entire Sikh population would be concentrated on the Indian side to preserve the unity of the Sikh *Panth* (nation).

Thus, a paradoxical situation arose wherein Congress leaders urged the non-Muslims of the Western Punjab districts to stay put, but the Akalis, led by the Master, enjoined them to migrate. The most spirited intervention on the Congress side came from Baba Kharak Singh—widely respected as an elder statesman of the community—who decried the 8 March resolution most vigorously. He declared that partition was 'a betrayal—a deviation from the path of the Sikh Gurus'.⁴³ As an addendum to this point, the Baba issued a subsequent statement, which was also picked up by the press, in which he observed that the decision of a section of the Sikh *Panth* to demand division of the Punjab was unfair because it dealt with the future of lakhs of Sikhs in Western Punjab and should have been taken only after arranging a plebiscite.⁴⁴ Following this, the Baba also issued an appeal through the *CMG*,⁴⁵ one of the most widely read newspapers of Punjab, requesting Sikhs and Hindus not to leave their properties in West Punjab.

While Kharak Singh gave the impression that a non-partition alternative to Punjab's crisis was possible, the section of the Congress that had been behind the 8 March resolution soon reasserted the party's original position, through a series of statements by Swarn Singh, in which he advised the Sikh peasantry not to migrate from their villages in West Punjab,⁴⁶ dismissed the possibility of a plebiscite 'in such troubled times'⁴⁷ and reiterated that 'there can be no settlement on the basis of United Punjab'.⁴⁸

On the other hand, the Master made his case on the grounds that the attacks on non-Muslims in Western Punjab showed clear intent to wipe the area clean of minorities once Britain's security cover was removed from India.⁴⁹ The attacks had heaped tremendous indignities on the Sikh community: women were abducted; forcible conversions took place; families without homes or the wherewithal to migrate easily had to live in temporary camps. Above all, neither Jinnah nor the leaders of the Punjab League had issued a blanket condemnation of the attacks. Under the circumstances, the notional partition line would act as a focal point to induce further migration until the entire Sikh population was relocated safely on the Indian side of the line.

In the event, however, it was the Congress Sikhs whose views prevailed, and no further migration ensued. This signalled the end of the first major attempt at Sikh mobilization in the lead-up to the transfer of power. In its wake, as of the middle of March, nearly 2,090 persons had died with 1,042 injured, of which a disproportionate number were Sikhs.⁵⁰ It is worth mentioning that as large as these numbers were, they would have been several magnitudes higher had further unorganized migration from Western Punjab continued.

When the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, announced on 3 June 1947—with Jawaharlal Nehru representing the Congress, Mohammad Ali Jinnah representing the Muslim League, and Baldev Singh representing the Akali Dal by his side—that British India would be partitioned by August and the division would be on a notional basis, barring exceptional circumstances, a new round of Sikh mobilization ensued. To better understand the basis of this mobilization, it is necessary, at the outset, to clarify some of the key aspects of the political geography of Punjab in this period.

Figure 1 shows the relative proportions of Muslims and Sikhs in the population of each district of British Punjab and in the Sikh princely states, as well as the notional partition line, or the Radcliffe line, as it was eventually called.⁵¹ We note that the line bifurcated the area that had the densest settlement of Sikhs in the whole of Punjab, outside of the princely states. While this observation is unremarkable per se, what complicated the matter was that the land on either side of the line was also the most fertile in Punjab. As shown in the figure, four of the province's five great rivers—Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej and Bias—passed through this area.

What is particularly noteworthy here is that Sikh cultivators with ancestral family ties in the Gurdaspur, Amritsar and Ferozepur districts had played a central role in the development of the canal colony districts of Montgomery and Lyallpur. They had been awarded plots of land in these districts as inducements to serve with the Indian army in World War I.⁵² Over time, by dint of their efforts, this area was to become the agrarian core of Punjab. **Table 1**, which lists the district-wise military recruitment by community from 1939 to 1944, underscores the fusion of agrarian and military power that occurred due to the land grants. As the table indicates, Sikh recruitment from the Central Punjab districts was considerably in excess of the group's demographic share in these districts compared to the rest of Punjab.

As he had been before, Baba Kharak Singh was unsparing in his criticism of the 3 June plan:

In my opinion the Congress leaders ... have fallen prey to British diplomacy ... I would appeal to the Congress not to yield to the demand for the division of India. If it does I am afraid it will be signing its own death warrant.⁵³

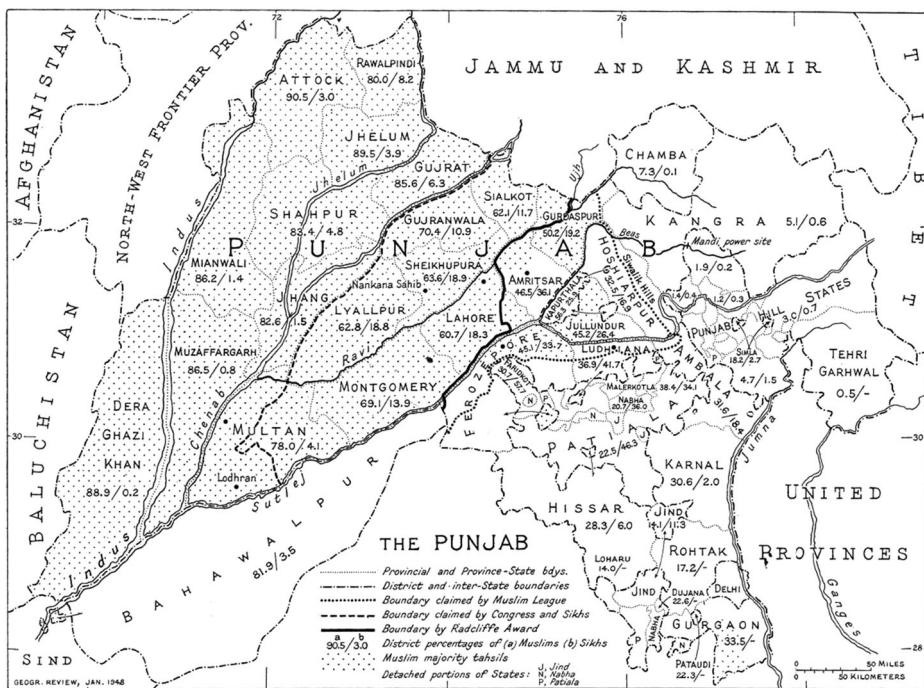


Figure 1. Distribution of Sikh population in Punjab before Partition. Source: Fig. 2 - Partition of the Punjab in O. H. G. Spate, 'The Partition of India and the Prospects of Pakistan', *Geographical Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1948, p. 8. Reproduced with permission of John Wiley and Sons Limited (Journals), © 1948 American Geographical Society.

Other Congress stalwarts too were scathing in their criticism. The great Punjabi patriot and revolutionary, Sardar Ajit Singh, left no one in doubt as to the magnitude of the mistake he thought his party's leadership had made: 'The champions of partition will not escape their condemnation in history and will be execrated by present and coming generations ... the case must be taken to the UNO [United Nations Organization]'.⁵⁴ Non-party elites also joined the chorus. At a Sikh conference in Delhi, the Maharaja of Faridkot called the 3 June plan 'unholy' and appealed to Sikhs to unite.⁵⁵

Responding to these criticisms, Master Tara Singh made a statement that radically shifted the terms of the debate. In the statement, issued on 6 June, he declared: 'We cannot accept anything like a notional division. It is not a matter of mere political power for us, our very existence is at stake'.⁵⁶ Lest the Master's statement be interpreted as a sign that the Akalis were now tacitly backing out of their acceptance of the 3 June plan, Giani Kartar Singh clarified: 'It is wrong and against facts ... that the Sikhs have accepted the 3 June plan in an unquestionable manner such have not accepted'.⁵⁷ He noted that the Sikhs had communicated their 'stand' in a letter sent to Lord Mountbatten on 2 June. A passage in the letter, which was made public, stated that '[t]he Sikhs now ask only their integrity be maintained and their shrines be saved from Pakistan'.

In effect, the Akali leaders were insinuating that the Sikhs would engage in violence unless the partition line was drawn as far west as possible to include the majority of the

Table 1. District-wise recruitment from the major Punjabi communities 1939–1944.

Districts	Muslim recruitment	Muslim population	Hindu recruitment	Hindu population	Sikh recruitment	Sikh population
Ambala	31.6	31.7	18.7	48.4	44	18.7
Gurgaon	28.6	33.6	64.3	65.8	0.2	0.07
Hissar	22	28.3	68.8	64.8	6.3	6.04
Karnal	31.4	30.6	56.7	67	5.8	2
Rohtak	18.9	17.4	74.1	81.6	0.203	0.20
Simla	10.8	18.2	82.2	76.4	0.8	2.7
Ferozepur	35.4	45.1	10.4	19.6	47	33.7
Hoshiarpur	32.8	32.5	29.1	40	34.7	16.9
Jullundur	42.6	45.2	16.7	17.6	34.4	26.5
Kangra	3.5	4.8	95.1	93.2	0.8	0.5
Ludhiana	34.2	37	9.4	20.4	53.5	41.7
Amritsar	34.8	46.5	8.5	15.3	47.2	36.1
Gujranwala	71.1	70.5	10.6	11.8	9.03	10.9
Gurdaspur	50.2	51.1	15.4	24.6	22.4	19.2
Lahore	74.2	63.5	5.6	16.8	12.2	18.3
Sheikhpura	41.7	63.6	6.3	9.1	34.9	18.9
Sialkot	47.4	62.1	0.8	19.4	21.8	11.7
Cambellpur	95.9	90.4	2.3	6.4	1.5	3
Gujarat	87.02	85.6	4	7.7	7.1	6.4
Jhelum	89.9	89.4	6.3	6.5	3.2	3.9
Mianwali	94.6	86.2	4.4	12.4	.4	1.4
Rawalpindi	90.9	80	3.8	10.5	4	8.2
Shahpur	88.1	83.7	5.8	10.1	3.7	4.8
Dera Ghazi Khan	84.4	88.2	12.8	11.6	.8	.2
Jhang	80.3	82.6	14.9	15.8	2.9	1.5
Lyallpur	47.8	62.8	7.6	11.6	31.6	18.8
Montgomery	48.3	69.1	8.7	14.4	30.4	13.2
Multan	64	78	11.6	16.4	13.8	4.2
Muzaffargarh	78.1	86.4	10.7	12.7	1.5	0.8

Sources: (i) Statement showing recruitment figures community-wise for each district in Punjab, Punjab State Archives, Chandigarh, File 14446/175/259; (ii) Population data from Census of India 1941.

Note: The reported figures are district-wise percentages.

Sikh population on the Indian side of the line. When it became obvious, however, that the Congress was not going to budge from its earlier stance that the line should be notional only, the Akalis resolved to put the Master's statement to a referendum. On 28 June, the Akali Dal issued a call for a countrywide *harta* (strike) by Sikhs on 8 July.⁵⁸ The call gave specific details of how the *harta* should be observed: no peasant was to plough the fields; no shop was to be opened; no Sikh was to sleep on a bed (a sign of mourning death in the family); prayers were to be conducted and so on. A few days before the *harta*, the Master issued another statement in which he clearly raised the spectre of violence: '[W]e should accept the 3 June plan only if the government accepts the river Chenab as boundary, thereby maintaining solidarity of the Sikhs'.⁵⁹

The *harta* turned out to be a great success. Markets were closed in most parts of Delhi; almost completely in Lahore, Amritsar, Rawalpindi, Solan, Ambala, Ferozepur and Patiala; partly in Srinagar and Kanpur; and completely in Lyallpur, Jullunder and Ludhiana. Resolutions were passed across Punjab demanding the integrity and solidarity of the Sikhs, adequate share in canal waters and protection of Sikh shrines. In the wake of the *harta*, which also went off without a single incident of violence, a huge Diwan was organized at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Tara Singh was the star speaker at the Diwan. He addressed the audience with great conviction, saying that he anticipated a big struggle for the

Sikhs.⁶⁰ He also explained his refusal to sign a peace pledge with leaders of the Muslim League and the Congress thus: 'The present peace moves were designed to deceive the Sikhs'.

As the Master forged ahead with his escalatory tactics, some voices urged caution. The *Hindustan Times* carried an editorial that advised the Sikhs to plan an organized exchange of population and not make their claim on the basis of religious shrines because the Muslims too were losing many of their sacred shrines. With respect to the demand for the exchange of property as well as population, the editorial was of the view that 'where welfare of men, women, and children is concerned property has to be subordinated'.⁶¹

Countering these voices, some Akali leaders offered alternative arguments against division on a notional basis. The CMG carried a letter from Sardar Jodh Singh, principal of Khalsa College and a widely respected intellectual in the region, in which he argued that the inclusion of Sikh areas in the West Punjab on the basis of the notional line of division would in fact put at stake the most favoured profession of the Sikhs—the armed forces.⁶² Since the army in Pakistan was most likely to prefer only Muslims, what were the seventeen lakh Sikhs who would remain in the western districts to do? Hence, he urged the League to accept a line of division that would enable Sikhs to migrate with minimum bitterness. In his memorandum to the Punjab Boundary Commission on behalf of the community, Advocate Harnam Singh foregrounded the issue of land revenue.⁶³ Among other things, he argued that Lahore and Amritsar should go to India since the Sikhs possessed roughly sixty per cent of the assessed land in Lahore, which paid two thirds of all the land revenue collected from Punjab, whereas in Amritsar, the Sikhs paid twelve lakh rupees and the Muslims only three lakhs out of the total revenue of 15.75 lakhs. On the question of military representation, the memorandum proclaimed that the Sikhs were committed to the defence of India: 'With the partition of the Punjab the Eastern Punjab becomes the frontier Province of India and the Sikhs become literally the gatekeepers of the Union of India'.⁶⁴

Irrespective of how the case for 'other factors' to be considered in setting the partition line was made, and notwithstanding Giani Kartar Singh's threat to Jenkins, it became apparent to all sides concerned from July onwards that the Boundary Commission's award would be on notional lines. At this point, the Akalis began to threaten violence openly to secure a favourable award. At a meeting with the Punjab governor, Evan Jenkins, Giani Kartar Singh intimated that 'there would be trouble' unless arrangements were made 'such as to bring three-quarters or at least two-thirds of the Sikh population into Eastern Punjab'.⁶⁵ Those who would not be included in Eastern Punjab by these arrangements, roughly about 400,000 Sikhs, would have to be moved to the East in exchange for 400,000 Muslims, who would be moved to the West. When Jenkins relayed this information to Lord Mountbatten, he observed that later in his conversation with him, the Giani put the number of Sikhs to be moved at 500,000–600,000 and the number of Muslims at 1,000,000, with property as well as population being taken into account in the exchange, since the Sikhs were on the whole better off than the Muslims.

In his letter to Mountbatten, the Punjab governor registered his alarm at Kartar Singh's blasé attitude towards violence. The mood was no different among the masses. Darbara Singh, a lecturer at Khalsa College, wrote a letter to the CMG in which he commented

that exchange of population on a large scale had been organized with limited loss of life and property between Bulgaria and Turkey and Turkey and Greece, and asked why this could also not be done in Punjab.⁶⁶

The straw that broke the camel's back were apprehensions going around that the British, anticipating Sikh resistance, were planning to announce the Boundary Commission's award only after the transfer of power on 14 and 15 August. Swarn Singh gave an authoritative and ominous voice to these apprehensions when he observed that the 'Sikhs feel that a transfer of power before settlement of boundaries would prejudice the issue against the Sikhs—they are determined to resist it'.⁶⁷

As previous research has documented, it was around this time that a Council of Action, led by a former Indian National Army officer, Niranjan Gill, and involving all the leading Akali leaders and Sikh princes, was formed to prepare the Sikh masses to carry out the political project outlined by Giani Kartar Singh to Evan Jenkins.⁶⁸ In line with this plan, members of the council travelled extensively throughout Punjab exhorting Sikh villagers to form *jathas*.⁶⁹ In the East, the *jathas* would create sufficient terror to force the Muslim population to migrate to the West. In the West, they would ensure safe passage for their brethren, who would be moved to the East.

A new issue that came to the fore as the *jathas* went about their task was refugee resettlement. Much of the prime property vacated by Muslims migrating from Eastern Punjab had been taken up by Sikhs migrating from the canal colony districts. Delhi too was overrun. At one level, this was understandable since these districts were closer to the new border, but the net upshot of these developments was that refugees from Western Punjab had to settle for inferior properties. *The Tribune* carried a letter in which the writer, a refugee from Western Punjab, had the following reaction to the lands they were allotted: '[T]here is dust and dust everywhere ... what we have been allotted can hardly be called villages'.⁷⁰

Hereafter, Tara Singh initiated a campaign to force Muslims remaining in India, particularly Delhi Muslims, to migrate to Pakistan. The CMG reported the Master as saying that Sikhs were likely to 'perish' if Muslims were not made to vacate land in West Uttar Pradesh and Delhi.⁷¹ The report observed that, for the Master, it was simply a question of the estimated 2.5 million acres in excess that the Sikhs and Hindus had vacated in West Punjab. Sharp reactions followed. Mahatma Gandhi, in particular, was livid in his denouement of the statement: 'if Delhi's Hindus and Sikhs and sufferers from Pakistan are determined to rid themselves of Muslims they should say so boldly ... the government should then declare itself incapable of affording protection to Muslims'.⁷²

Strongly rejecting Gandhi's stance, Tara Singh raised the issue of loyalty: 'Let Mahatma Gandhi pay more attention to the property of Hindus and Sikhs. It is not a popular government that pays more attention to the rights of the disloyal than the loyal citizen'.⁷³ He also added: 'no Hindu and Sikh can be loyal to Pakistan'. Sikhs in Delhi took the Master's rhetoric to an altogether different level when a group took out an anti-government procession from Gurudwara Sisganj to Birla House.⁷⁴ The police first used batons to disperse the procession and then arrested twenty-seven people.

Gandhi's assassination on 30 January 1948 brought the curtains down on this phase of Sikh politics. The community's search for a 'homeland' would continue in independent India, but that is a subject beyond the scope of this study.



Why Sikh mobilization failed after 20 February, but succeeded after 3 June

The central hypothesis of this study is that the failure or success of nationalist mobilizations will depend, all other things being equal, on the mobilization strategy adopted by belligerent elites. More specifically, land-based mobilization strategies, involving a clear articulation of the link between group violence and defence of individual rights to land and a costly action indicating the elite's resolve to use violence in a systematic and disciplined manner, have a greater chance of success than mobilization strategies that rely solely on identity politics and/or elite-warrior linkages. In what follows, we subject this hypothesis to an empirical test using the Sikh case. Our prior expectation is that the hypothesis can be considered valid if it is clearly observable that the belligerents among the Sikh elite employed identity politics or warriors/extremists already committed to their cause or some combination of the two during the mobilization in March, but foregrounded the issue of land dispossession in July.

When Master Tara Singh had famously waved his *kirpan* before a Muslim procession on the steps of the Lahore Assembly on 4 March as a gesture of defiance, he was clearly reminding his audience of the great sacrifices made by Sikh Gurus to preserve Sikhism as a way of life when it faced tremendous persecution by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. To understand the political context of this gesture, it is worth noting that a movement to revive Sikh traditions had been ongoing since the late nineteenth century to reverse a growing trend towards internal fragmentation within the community.⁷⁵ The formation of the Akali Dal, the subsequent creation of the SGPC and the puritanical Tara Singh's rise to prominence within both these institutions were precisely the embodiment of this movement.⁷⁶ The behaviour of Sikh elites and masses on or around the 4 March event, however, indicated that the tendency towards fragmentation had continued.

The first indication came on 3 March at the 'victory' rally organized by the Muslim League. One of the speakers at the rally was Bhai Hari Singh, a prominent leader of the Mazhbhi Sikhs, who stated: 'We 20 lac [sic] Mazhbhi Sikhs have been and are maltreated by caste Sikhs/Akalis and ... we will fight along with ... the Musalmans ... for the achievement of Pakistan'.⁷⁷ Here, Hari Singh was articulating a longstanding cleavage that pitted the low caste Mazhbhi Sikhs against the high caste Jat Sikhs. As noted by Wilkinson,⁷⁸ this cleavage had been institutionalized by colonial military recruitment practices that assigned Mazhbis and Jats to separate regiments. These colonial categorizations, in turn, had spurred efforts by Mazhbhi Sikh leaders since the end of World War II to have the Mazhbis be recognized as a separate political entity from the Jats in the ongoing negotiations over the transfer of power.⁷⁹

Next, although the gathering of Sikhs and Hindus in front of the Lahore Assembly on 4 March had numbered well over 100,000,⁸⁰ evidence came to the fore showing that the whole was definitely not the sum of its parts. Despite there being major differences in the political persuasions of the major newspapers in the province, there was a general agreement that the core group that clashed with the Punjab police, which triggered the reprisals in the Western Punjab districts, was made up of a few hundred non-Muslim students from the elite Dayanand Arya Vedic College, who had been urged by their principal, G. L. Dutta, to demonstrate against Khizar's resignation.⁸¹

Finally, and most importantly, a third line of division came to the fore after the Muslim reprisals following Tara Singh's provocative speech. While the attacks had

sent a first wave of non-Muslims scurrying from the Western Punjab districts to the East, this was no more than a trickle compared to the massive migration that was to follow in August. Furthermore, the number of migrants remained low even though the Master tried to accentuate the process by demanding partition on a notational basis. As Penderal Moon, who was, at the time, prime minister of the Muslim princely state of Bahawalpur, astutely observes in his memoirs, considering the scale of the 4 March attacks, 'the exodus of Hindus and Sikhs at this time from West to East Punjab was surprisingly small'.⁸²

Why were the majority of Sikhs and Hindus in Western Punjab reluctant 'to read the signs of an impending revolution'?⁸³ The key issue was land. One Baldev Singh Saini of the Commercial College of Delhi made the point very aptly in an article published by *Dawn*. Warning Sikh leaders against falling prey to 'the game the Congress was playing', Saini observed that partition would downgrade the Sikhs of Western Punjab from a superior economic status—they owned more and better quality land than Muslims—to an inferior economic status—they would have to play catch-up with Hindus, who dominated the businesses and industries of Eastern Punjab.⁸⁴ Hence, they were better off staying behind and negotiating terms of citizenship that would be easily accepted by the Muslim League rather than migrating to Eastern Punjab, where no such favours could be expected. Taking a more strident line to underscore the importance of protecting their land rights at all costs, an editorial in *The Tribune* gave fearsome advice to non-Muslims: 'don't desert Lahore like cowards ... remove your women folk, children, valuables, consider your homes like castles, fight like soldiers to save civilization from jungle raj'.⁸⁵

Thus, in sync with our prior expectations, far from a community whose members were united in their willingness to kill or be killed on its behalf, what the events in March revealed was a deep chasm between the symbolic politics employed by the belligerent Sikh elites and the land-based political outlook of the Sikh masses. It was precisely this chasm that gave moderate elites like Baba Kharak Singh the discursive space to thwart the ethnic outbidding dynamic that is crucial for ethnic war. Here, it is particularly noteworthy that the Baba used the notion of 'betrayal' to criticize those who were demanding partition. In doing so, he skilfully played up another aspect of the Sikh tradition that was obscured in Tara Singh's 4 March oratory, namely that the sacrifices the Sikh Gurus had endured were not the making of their Muslim persecutors alone, but also of the Sikhs who had betrayed them to the latter.

Fast forward to July 1947. Kharak Singh continued to urge Sikhs to 'boycott' partition,⁸⁶ but unlike in March, few others shared his optimism. Sardar Ajit Singh issued a statement on 18 July urging minorities to stay where they were and 'give full support to the new state'.⁸⁷ If they were brave and fearless, he argued, they could not be ignored, but no state would 'tolerate a fifth column within its boundaries'. At the West Punjab Minorities convention held in Rawalpindi on 7 July, one Sant Singh, echoing Ajit Singh, noted that if the Sikhs stayed behind in West Punjab, their safety would be guaranteed by their numbers alone—they would constitute twenty-seven per cent of the population—since no state could afford to ignore a minority with such a strong demographic presence. Casting apprehensions on this thesis, however, one Sardar Uttam Singh Dulal pointed out at the same convention that no such guarantee ought to be expected since, even as of that date, the killers of Rawalpindi had not been condemned by the Muslim



League leaders; on the contrary, those among the killers who had been killed by the minorities in self-defence had been termed martyrs.⁸⁸

What had effected this transformation in the mood of the Western Punjab Sikhs? Looking closely at the mobilization processes in March and July, we notice a stark difference in the extent to which Tara Singh and his supporters had gone to integrate the issue of land dispossession into their political articulations in July. This issue, which was almost entirely absent from their pronouncements in March, now assumed utmost salience. The Master had, of course, foregrounded the issue in his 6 June statement, where he declared in clear, unambiguous terms that a partition line drawn using a notional basis was unacceptable to the Sikhs. However, he had started formulating the question of mobilization in terms of the defence of land rights as early as May 1947. On 3 May, he had issued a detailed statement in which he welcomed Jinnah's call for the exchange of population since he saw such an exchange 'as quite different from immigration', noting that 'exchange implies property as well'.⁸⁹ Following up on this statement, the Master, along with Baldev Singh and Swarn Singh, also dispatched a telegram to the then Secretary of State Listowel, where they asserted that the river Chenab be set as the boundary if India were divided, since the Sikhs had developed the canal colonies and the eastern districts did not have any similar resources with which the Sikhs could exchange their properties.⁹⁰

Of no less significance was the deposition made by Advocate Harnam Singh before the Punjab Boundary Commission, where he provided raw data showing the discrepancy in land revenue payments made by Sikh and Muslim landowners in West Punjab. Or Sardar Jodh Singh's observation that a notional partition line would mean the perpetual exclusion of West Punjab Sikhs from military service, a key source of employment as well as cultural identity for the community. Or Giani Kartar Singh's conversations with the Punjab governor, in the course of which he enunciated very frankly that on matters of population exchange, the Muslims of East Punjab could not be treated on par with the Sikhs of West Punjab because of the superior economic status of the latter.

A flurry of ominous statements issued by Punjab Muslim League leaders also added grist to the mill. A prime example was a statement issued on 12 July by Feroze Khan Noon, a major figure in the provincial League. Noting that most tenants in the province were Muslims, the statement observed that the Sikh claim to land meant nothing since 'Punjab was owned by the state and revenue was paid half by the owner and half by the tenant'.⁹¹ That such statements were testing the resolve of Western Punjab's non-Muslims to stay is evident from Mohammad Ali Jinnah's response to a question about the fate of minorities in Pakistan at a press conference held at his residence in Delhi on 13 July. Sikhs and Hindus had nothing to fear from Pakistan, Jinnah stated, as long as they pledged their loyalty to the new state, and he urged them not to make too much of an issue out of single statements since there were 'crooks, cranks and mad men all over the world'.⁹²

It is instructive to note, however, that the transition from mass reluctance to mass acceptance of violence did not simply follow because the belligerent Sikh elites had started articulating the question of violence in terms of the defence of land rights. On 20 June 1947, the Master gave a press statement in which he appealed to Sikhs living in the western districts to begin shifting to the eastern districts so as to 'consolidate'

the community.⁹³ The response to the statement from the Western Punjab Sikhs was revealing. At a meeting of an all-party Sikh committee in Rawalpindi that was specifically convened to discuss the issue, most participants expressed their shock at the statement and strongly voiced their disapproval.⁹⁴

We note that these reactions from the Western Punjab Sikhs were euphemisms for a credibility problem. Despite what the belligerent elites were putting out in their public statements, it was not obvious that they had sufficient unity of purpose to ensure that violence would be used in a disciplined and coordinated manner to protect the economic interests of the masses. Of particular relevance here were the fraught political relations between the Akali Dal and the rulers of the Sikh princely states. If group mobilization was to proceed on the lines indicated by the Akali Dal leaders, the cooperation of the princely states was absolutely critical since their location within the Punjab brought tremendous geo-political advantages. Yet, as noted by Copland,⁹⁵ the latter considered the Akalis, particularly Tara Singh, as dangerous revolutionaries because of their proclivity towards agitational politics. The Akalis, on the other hand, considered the Sikh princes to be heretical because of their secular lifestyles. While a rapprochement between the two sides had been ongoing since April 1947, it had yet to be consummated into a firm and unyielding alliance as of June 1947.

Thus, even though Punjab was clearly on the boil, there was still time, even at this stage, for one last throw of the dice by moderate Sikh leaders. What completely shut the door on them, however, was Tara Singh's decision to call a countrywide *hartal* by the Sikhs on 8 July. Under the circumstances that prevailed, the *hartal* amounted to a plebiscite on whether the Sikhs should resist the notional boundary line using violent means and whether the Master had the ability to lead the resistance. While a low turnout would have severely dented his credibility, a high turnout would destroy the credibility of his opponents. In the event, the *hartal* turned out to be a complete success. Most importantly, it passed off without a single incident of unrest, indicating that the ethnic outbidding dynamic within the Sikh community was complete.

It is plausible to argue, however, that the plebiscite of 8 July may not have been fully representative of the 'mass' voice within the Sikh community. Indeed, as documented by Kaur,⁹⁶ the narratives of partition survivors from Punjab's lower caste communities, including the Mazhabi Sikhs, reveal one key difference from the experiences of upper caste survivors—they had not left the violence-affected areas until the very last moment.

The circumstances that prevailed in August–September 1947 certainly gave the Mazhabi Sikhs an opportunity to break the social dominance of Jat Sikhs in their everyday lives, and, to a large extent, explain their reluctance to leave until the last moment. Nonetheless, the question of land dispossession weighed too heavily on their choices. As noted by Kaur,⁹⁷ Punjab's lower castes had followed Hindu and Sikh cultivators when they migrated from East Punjab to West Punjab during the canal colony movement. Hence, in as much as they faced the same threats of violence 'on par with their upper caste counterparts',⁹⁸ it follows that 'their migratory pattern could be expected to be the same'. Indeed, when they did move, 'They took almost the same routes and resources as many others and arrived in Delhi for similar reasons: they either had previous contacts living in Delhi or expected to gain better economic opportunities'.⁹⁹

Conclusion

In early September 1947, Sir Francis Mudie, the governor of West Punjab, wrote to Muhammad Ali Jinnah about the 'gigantic proportions' the refugee problem had taken. To buttress this argument, the letter referred to a particularly dangerous incident that had taken place in Seikhupura district:

At Govindgarh ... there was a collection of 30,000 or 40,000 Mazhbi Sikhs with arms. They refused even to talk to the Deputy Commissioner, an Anglo-Indian, who advanced with a flag of truce. They shot at him and missed. Finally arrangements were made to evacuate the lot.¹⁰⁰

Few moments in the partition saga in Punjab were more redolent of the trials and tribulations of the Mazhbi Sikh population than this incident. The members of this Sikh subgroup had no inclination to join the hordes of non-Muslims fleeing West Punjab for East Punjab in the tumultuous partition months. Nevertheless, their land-based ties to the Jat Sikhs ensured that once the question of land ownership was politicized by Master Tara Singh and his belligerent faction in the top Sikh leadership, they too would have to join the exodus. Incidentally, the caste hierarchy within the Hindu and Sikh communities continued to be reproduced in the patterns of resettlement. For example, in Delhi, lower caste communities moved into precisely the areas that had been vacated by lower class Muslims.¹⁰¹

The complex choices faced by the Mazhbi Sikhs during the partition of India in August 1947 underscore the central question that this study has tried to answer, namely why attempts to mobilize ethnic groups for war are successful in some instances, but not in others. The Sikh experience provides a useful vantage point for addressing this question. Between February and July 1947, there were two clear instances in which a section of Sikh elites tried to mobilize group members. While the first attempt at mobilization in March failed to elicit sufficient mass participation, the second attempt, in July, was relatively more effective.

The core argument advanced is that the success or failure of ethnic mobilization crucially hinges on a particular dimension of elite strategy. Specifically, ethnic mobilization is more likely to be successful when belligerent elites are able to link group violence with the defence of the land rights of ordinary members of the community and give a credible signal of their ability to use violence in a disciplined and systematic manner. Conversely, such mobilizations are more likely to fail when these linkages are absent. This is attributed to the specific capacity of anti-land dispossession politics to sublimate intra-group differences and focus attention on the perceived source of dispossession, i.e. the outsider ethnic group.

The Sikh case closely conforms to these predictions. Although there were elements of popular participation in the mobilization in March, the approach taken by the belligerent elites was focused around appeals to identity, leaving significant gaps in which moderate elites could insert themselves to thwart the ethnic outbidding dynamic. In July, however, the belligerents adopted a land-based mobilization strategy, clearly spelling out their stance on a key issue on which they had been silent in March—compensations for the Sikhs of West Punjab for the economic losses they would be incurring from migration—and then using the institutional resources at their disposal to send a

costly signal, in the form of the *hartal* on 8 July, that they had the capabilities to use violence to secure those compensations. These actions set the stage for the violence that ensued in August 1947.

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Notes

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41. Moon, *Divide and quit*, p. 78.
42. Moon, *Divide and quit*, p. 78.
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44. *Civil & Military Gazette* [hereafter CMG], 8 April 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 128.
45. CMG, 17 April 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 150.
46. CMG, 11 April 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 128.
47. CMG, 23 April 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 128.
48. CMG, 23 April 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 128.
49. *Dawn*, 31 May 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 180.
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54. *The Tribune*, 9 June 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 204.
55. CMG, 14 June 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 209.
56. *Dawn*, 6 June 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 210.
57. *Hindustan Times*, 21 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 271.
58. *Hindustan Times*, 29 June 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 238.
59. CMG, 5 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 252.
60. *Hindustan Times*, 12 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 256.
61. *Hindustan Times*, 12 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 257.
62. CMG, 19 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 271.
63. Document # 124 in Singh, *Select documents*, p. 239.
64. Document # 124 in Singh, *Select documents*, p. 239.
65. Enclosure to Annexure II to Document # 91 in Singh, *Select documents*, p. 165.
66. CMG, 20 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 325.
67. CMG, 8 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 264.
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72. CMG, 21 December 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 509.
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83. Moon, *Divide and quit*, p. 79.
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91. *Dawn*, 13 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 259.
92. *Dawn*, 14 July 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 261.
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94. *The Hindustan Times*, 24 June 1947, as cited in Tanwar, *Reporting the partition*, p. 237.
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97. Kaur, *Since 1947*, p. 163.
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